

The Building Blocks of Faith: Baptism
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I remember the first baptism I performed as a student minister. It was for Blake Ellison, who was a member of my junior high youth group. I'm sure Blake was a good kid at heart, but he was the kind of kid that when he sat in the back pew at church, you knew he was up to something. Blake was not really into church, and he only came to youth because he was forced to. Based on his behavior there, I think God was using Blake to prove to me that there really is a Devil.

And yet, when the time came, much to my surprise, Blake presented himself for baptism. He came into the water and placed himself in front of me, and after I made up a few nice things to say about him, I slowly lowered Blake into the water. Now, they say that most people will promise to believe anything if you hold them underwater long enough. So, moved by what had to be the Holy Spirit, I held Blake under there for just a few seconds longer, figuring God needed the extra time to do His work. I'm happy to report Blake is now an Eagle Scout and is going to college on full scholarship. I'd like to think those few extra seconds had something to do with that.

Baptism is one of the most meaningful and controversial practices of the Christian church. There are multiple understandings of when to do it, how to do it, and what it means when it's done. The Bible is crystal clear in some areas, and frustratingly vague in others. Our own denominational tradition has tried to sort things out, but we are still left with widely different views that serve to keep Christians separate from each other.

One of these dividing views is at what age a person should be baptized: as an infant or an adult, or somewhere in between. Mark's scripture today shows us that Jesus was baptized as an adult, and that seemed to be the prevailing pattern of baptism that we find in the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament. There are no examples of infant baptism in the Bible, but there are instances of entire households being baptized, which could have included infants. So the Bible isn't a whole lot of help here.

As a denomination, we believe and practice adult baptism, or what we call believer's baptism. Our stance is that a person, when they reach an appropriate age (usually around 11 or 12), should make a conscious choice to commit their lives to God. These youth usually go through an educational process, like a Pastor's Class, at the end of which we hope and pray they are ready to give their lives to Christ and choose to be baptized.

Obviously, this contrasts with infant baptism, where that choice is made for the person by their parents. One of the main justifications for infant baptism is that we are all born sinners, and must be cleansed of that sin as soon as possible so that our lives are claimed for God.

Another controversy surrounding baptism is the method. As Disciples, we practice immersion baptism, better known as dunking. This also follows the precedent set in the New Testament by John the Baptist. Other religious groups baptize by sprinkling for both infants and adults, where pastor dips his or her hand into the water and dribbles a few drops on the person's forehead.

So which is right? Infant or adult? Sprinkling or dunking? I don't believe there is one right way to baptize, but what our denomination practices, believer's baptism by

immersion, works best for me. I was baptized as an infant, as I bet many of you were. Some of you may have been baptized as teenagers or adults. Some of you may have never been baptized, in which case I'd love to talk to you personally and encourage you to consider what it means to be baptized. I would have preferred to make the choice myself, but the fact that made parents made it for me does not in any way diminish its meaning for me. I don't resent my baptism or have a desire to be rebaptized. As an adult, I have accepted the promises made to me at my baptism, even though I don't remember the act itself. The significance of baptism doesn't depend on the age of the person or the amount of water; the significance of baptism for us depends on our acceptance of the promises attached to the water and how we understand its meaning for our lives.

So, what does it mean? What happens when we are baptized? Again, there are several rich layers of understanding here. Paul touches on one of them in the Romans verse, the idea of baptism being about life and death. The idea here is that, while we are not born sinners, we are all born with the inclination to sin, with a sinful nature. And if we don't take action, this sinful nature within us will grow and grow until it controls what we do. So, as Paul understands it, in order for us to live the new life Christ offers, we first have to die to our old self, our sinful self. We have to wash away the sinful nature, we have to take off the old skin, so that we can put on the new one. In this understanding of baptism, when we are submerged in the water our old self is drowned and our sins are washed away, and when we come out of that water we are resurrected into our new self.

This was played out in the movie "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" These three escaped convicts come across a group of people in the woods who are wearing white robes and singing like angels. The convicts follow the people and realize they are heading to a river for a baptism, so one of the convicts gets in line. After he gets dunked, he tells his friends that the minister told him after he was baptized that all his sins had been washed away, including the time he stole a pig and got caught. His friend says, "But you said you were innocent of that." "Well, I lied...and that's been washed away, too!"

To be baptized is to be simultaneously judged and redeemed. When we are baptized, we confess the sin that lives within us and are sentenced to death in the water, only to be resurrected and redeemed into new life by God. Author Nick Taylor writes, "The water of baptism is the amniotic fluid of the Kingdom of God. As the child emerges from the mother's womb into a totally different world, so a newly baptized person emerges from a world of sin and death into a world of grace and truth."

Through baptism, we are fundamentally changed, we are marked for life. Baptism means our life is no longer ours; it now belongs to God. We are given a new identity, we are claimed fully and completely by God. Notice, in the Mark passage, as Jesus came to be baptized no one knew who he was. No one was calling him the Messiah, he had no disciples following him. But when he came up out of the water, God gave named his new identity: You are My son, whom I love.

Through our baptisms, we are named as children of God. We are claimed by God as God's own. Does this mean we'll always remember that? No. Does it mean we'll always live our lives with this in mind? Unfortunately not. But it is true, nonetheless. We are a child of God, God's own beloved. We can renounce it. We can ignore it. We can run from it. But we can never, ever change it.

Do you remember the scene in "Toy Story" when Buzz Lightyear realizes he is not an authentic Space Ranger, but just an insignificant, plastic toy? He thinks he's not

unique, that he's just one of a million mass-produced products that all look and act the same. His cowboy friend Woody says to him, "You must not be thinking clearly. Look, over in that house, there's a kid who thinks you're the greatest, not because you're a Space Ranger, but because you're a TOY! Because you're HIS toy!" Buzz lifts his foot and looks at the bottom of his shoe. Written there in permanent marker, he sees the name of his owner: Andy. The name of the one who loves him is written on him forever. Through baptism, God writes his name on us, claiming us as his own, marking us as his most loved creation.

There's one more meaning of baptism that needs to be explored, and it goes back to the question of infant vs. adult baptism. One of the dangers of adult baptism is that it puts too much emphasis on our role in the event: we make the choice, we do the baptizing, we are the actors. It can diminish God's role in the act of baptism. It's important for us to remember that, ultimately, baptism is not something we do, but something that is done to us by God.

This doesn't mean, however, that we have no role or responsibility in baptism. The act of baptism is the act of covenant-making. And as in any covenant, both parties make promises and bear responsibilities. God promises to us the new life offered through Jesus Christ and the forgiveness of our sins, and bears the responsibility of living out that promise as we go through our lives, helping us to claim our true identity.

We also make a promise through baptism, and we bear a responsibility. We promise to embrace who we are and who we were created to be. We promise to no longer be controlled by the sin within us. We promise to not be dominated by fear, even fear of death. Through baptism we promise to put our faith in the promises of God.

As we emerge from the waters of baptism, we emerge with a responsibility to live out the faith we have professed. God has placed a call on our hearts, and our baptism is the answering of the phone. We are called to accept God's grace and love, and to then share those life-giving qualities with others. We are called to live as people raised from the dead, as people who have Christ living within us.

Martin Luther once said, "Remember your baptism, and be glad." I used to resent that phrase, because I can't remember my baptism. But I don't think Luther meant to remember the act; he meant to remember the promises made, remember the covenant made, and then live your life as what you have been claimed as: a child of God who has died to sin with Christ in his death and been raised to new life with him through his resurrection. If you have been baptized, rejoice! You are a new creation, you have God's name written on your heart in permanent marker. Remember your baptism, and be glad!